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Russia and Ukraine Trade Blame for Attack on Kursk School

By AFP

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Firefighters put out a fire in Ukraine's Sumy region following a Russian strike. **Handout / Ukraine Emergency Service / AFP**

Kyiv and Moscow traded blame on Sunday for a strike on a school in a Ukrainian-occupied town in Russia's Kursk region, while Kyiv said weekend missile and drone attacks killed at least 15 people in Ukraine.

Fighting in the nearly three-year war has shown no signs of de-escalating, despite U.S. President Donald Trump's promise to enact a ceasefire within "24 hours" of taking office on Jan. 20.

Russia and Ukraine have each accused the other of killing civilians since the war began, with the latest blame exchanged over Sudzha, a Ukrainian-occupied town near the border.

The Ukrainian Air Force said on Sunday that four people were killed in an attack the previous

day on a three-storey former school building sheltering evacuated civilians, with dozens more fished from the rubble.

Russia has not given a toll for the strike, but accused Kyiv of targeting the school in a "crime that has no forgiveness and no statute of limitations".

Across Ukraine, at least 15 people were killed as Russian strikes pummelled the centre and east of the country overnight Friday into Saturday, according to regional authorities and police.

Eleven people, including a child, were killed in Poltava when a missile hit a residential building early Saturday, the local administration said.

Officials said at least 16 people were wounded as rescuers used cranes to comb the ruins of the smouldering building for survivors.

"On the fifth floor, a woman, my friend, was carried out," said Olena Svyryd, a Poltava local.

"She's not alive. She was crushed by the wall. There were a lot of casualties."

Another three people were killed at the weekend in Sumy region, and one in Kharkiv, according to Ukrainian authorities.

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In Sudzha, which Ukraine has occupied for over five months, Kyiv accused Russia of using guided bombs on the former boarding school, carrying out the Feb. 1 strike against its own civilians.

"Russian aviation carried out a strike using a guided aerial bomb on a place of temporary residence of the civilian population," the Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday.

"Hitting civilians with bombs is a signature style of Russian criminals! Even when the civilians are local residents, Russians."

The Air Force put the toll at four dead, four seriously wounded and 80 rescued.

Moscow responded Sunday by accusing Kyiv's forces of the attack.

"On February 1, the Ukrainian Armed Forces committed another war crime by launching a targeted missile strike on a boarding school in the city of Sudzha," said a statement from Russia's defence ministry.

The ministry did not mention any deaths, while Kursk region's active governor Aleksandr Khinshtein said "there is no reliable information about the number of victims yet".

Kyiv launched a surprise operation into the Kursk region last August, seizing dozens of villages and small towns, including the regional hub of Sudzha -- home to about 6,000 people before the fighting.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called Russia "devoid of civility", sharing a video on social media showing a heavily damaged building, as well as a wounded man lying on the ground.

"They destroyed the building even though dozens of civilians were there," Zelensky said in a post on X. "Russian bombs destroy Ukrainian homes the same way. And even against their own civilians, the Russian army uses similar tactics."

A Russian official in Kursk told AFP last week that authorities were working "constantly" to secure the return of Russian civilians caught behind the front lines.

Thousands are thought to be trapped by fighting in the border region.

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Moscow has been advancing on the battlefield for over a year, and its invasion of Ukraine will this month hit the three-year mark.

The Russian military said Saturday its troops had "liberated" the village of Krymske in the northeastern suburbs of the city of Toretsk.

Toretsk in the eastern Donetsk region has been in the Kremlin's sights for months, as its capture would enable Russia to obstruct vital Ukrainian supply routes.

Both Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin have said they are ready for talks on ending the war, but neither has said when or how.

Trump has been critical of the billions Washington has spent arming Ukraine, while threatening to impose additional sanctions on Russia if Putin does not reach a "deal" to end the war.

Putin said last month he was willing to hold talks with Ukraine, but not with Zelensky whom he called "illegitimate".

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